The Eternal Primitive: Celt and Maori

Aedeen Cremin

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British colonisers made little distinction between the natives of Ireland and those of their new-found lands. Indeed the colonial observation of 'Indians' and others was used as a mirror for the history of the earlier inhabitants of Britain and Ireland. When the *Endeavour* artist Sydney Parkinson wrote that the Tahitians were 'in [political] constitution, what the ancient Britons were before civilisation',[1] he was following a well-worn track. Even today it is not unusual for British prehistorians to use comparatively modern ethnographic material to interpret European prehistory.[2] The underlying premise, so ingrained that it is rarely explicitly stated, is that the colonised people live in a timeless and unchanging world, reflecting a primordial 'primitive' stage of human evolution.

There is a corollary view, that the colonised have aptitudes peculiar to themselves and somehow connected to their lack of scientific technology, a view based on the oft-noted contrast between the physical conditions in which they lived and the sophistication of their arts and crafts.[3] This contrast was first expressed shortly after the Norman conquest of Ireland by the much-travelled Gerald of Wales, who thought that the Irish were 'a wild and inhospitable people; they live on beasts only and like beasts'. However, they had great musical talent: 'they seem to me to be incomparably more skilled in these than any other people I have seen'.[4] The current popular notion that there is a wisdom known only to indigenous people (including the Celts) is based on precisely the same colonial perception.

Archaeologists have naturalised these two colonial views to a degree which may seem surprising, but can be explained by the history of the discipline. While the study of the past through its material culture (artefacts) was of considerable antiquity it did not have a theoretical framework until the parallel growth of colonialism and evolutionary theory.[5] For the past century archaeological interpretation has therefore

[1] 1773, cited in Smith 1960: 94, and 1985: 131.
[2] There are numerous examples, e.g.. the use of chiefdoms observed in the Pacific and elsewhere to 'explain' Stonehenge, in Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 155; or funeral practices in contemporary Madagascar retrojected to explain Scottish Neolithic tombs, in Clarke et al eds 1984: 15.
[3] Discussed in Smith 1960: 91–92.
[4] Gerald (93, 92), trans. O'Meara 1982 and Kelly 1848.
[5] Trigger 1990, especially chapters 3 and 4.

been thoroughly imbued with colonial stereotypes. Furthermore, though archaeology claims to have a value-neutral scientific approach, in reality it endows its objects of study with magical value, claiming that artefacts can somehow reveal cultural practices: 'What distinguishes archaeology as a discipline … is, above all else, a commitment to treat archaeological material as an *empirical record* for the cultural past'.[6]

Add to this the archaeologists' fascination with quantification and technology and one ends up with a discipline where description outweighs analysis and where analysis relies heavily upon received ideas and analogy. The following paper attempts to examine how the colonial view has influenced two well-known archaeologists in their comparisons of specific artefacts made by Celtic and Maori people. My first example is the New Zealand *pa*, a fortified settlement, while the second is a carved wooden artefact of Maori appearance but Irish manufacture.

During the colonising period perceptions of New Zealand changed. To the first European voyagers it was just another Pacific island, not much different from Tahiti or Hawaii.[7] But after the settlement of New South Wales, New Zealand and its people were viewed in contrast to Australia. There is a consistent, though not always explicit, comparison between Maori and Australian Aboriginal people, generally to the advantage of the Maori, who were presented as more handsome, more intelligent and better able to adapt to British ways.[8] Such views reached their apogee in the idea that the Maori were Aryans, with a history similar to that of the Anglo-Saxons. As Edward Tregear eloquently proclaimed in *The Aryan Maori* (1885): 'No free-booting Huns or Vandals, mad for plunder and the sack of towns were they, but colonists seeking new homes beneath strange stars. We of Europe have set out on the same quest. Encircling Africa, the two vast horns of the great migration have touched again … the Aryan of the West greets the Aryan of the Eastern Seas'.[9]

The notion of an Indo-European origin for the Maori was reinforced by the linguistic work of the British-born John Macmillan Brown, Professor of English, History and Political Economy at Canterbury, NZ, and later Chancellor of the University of New Zealand. In *Languages of the Pacific* (1920) he wrote that 'it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Polynesians came from Europe many thousands of years ago'.[10] This particular view was sparked by the discovery of

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[6] Nicholas and Wylie 2009: 13–14. Emphasis mine. An interesting example of this approach is the magnificent volume *Symbols of Power* (Clarke et al eds 1984), in which it is taken for granted that notions of 'value' have not changed over the past 4000 years.
[7] Smith 1960, especially pp. 87–90.
[8] Sorrenson 1979, 13–14.
[9] Tregear 1885: 103–105, quoted in Sorrenson 1979: 30.
[10] Brown 1920: 29, cited in Sorrenson 1979, 23–24.

Tocharian-language documents in Chinese Turkestan (now China's Xinjiang province). I have written elsewhere about the misuse of Tocharian to indicate 'Celtic' ethnicity,[11] but in this context need to point out that if Polynesian were indeed related to Tocharian the spread would logically have been not via Europe, but down the Gansu corridor into southern China, thence along the southeast Asian and Pacific sea lanes. Brown's ideas prevailed at least into the 1930s, though modified in detail.[12] There was however a reaction against diffusionism, spearheaded by Raymond Firth, whose important article on 'Maori Hill Forts', the *pa*, appeared in the first issue of the journal *Antiquity* (1927).

But the colonial view of the eternal primitive was not so easily shaken off and Firth's work had an unfortunate consequence in a comparison between *pa* and British Iron Age hillforts published almost 50 years later by Aileen Fox as *Prehistoric Maori Fortifications in the North Island of New Zealand* (1976). Aileen Fox (née Henderson) was a well-respected British archaeologist, familiar with Celtic material, both from her own teaching and fieldwork and through her marriage to Sir Cyril Fox, Director of the National Museum of Wales. In 1972, on retiring from the University of Exeter, she applied to the University of Auckland for facilities to pursue her 'interest in the historic Maori culture which seems to have so much in common with the Celts of the Iron Age'.[13] She specially wished to see the *pa* and to compare them with British hillforts. At Auckland she did some teaching, excavated at Te Awanga, Hawkes Bay, and in 1974 gave the Macmillan Brown Lectures, an annual series that Brown had endowed by bequest in 1935 for the study of topics raised by his work.

Lady Fox's four lectures are the basis of her 1976 book. They are well-researched, charmingly written, unpretentious and informative. The first three are purely descriptive and doubtless did much to inform a wider New Zealand audience about the *pa.* There is but one ill-judged passage: 'it is clear that the *pa* was not the crude haphazard work of a group of blood-thirsty savages, but a response to the many, varied and changing needs of a prehistoric Maori community'.[14] The statement is odd because the Maori, however 'blood-thirsty' they might have been, have never been accused of being 'crude'[15] and it is curious that Fox should feel the need to defend them against such an imputation. I shall return to this later, but must first comment on the final lecture which deals with her own interest, 'some British analogies'.

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[11] Cremin 2010: 115–118.
[12] Sorrenson 1979, 30–33.
[13] Fox 1976: 1.
[14] Fox 1976: 49.
[15] see Smith 1960: 87–90.

In comparing the Maori with pre-Roman Britain Fox was on slippery ground. Put briefly, there are no convincing analogies between the two people at the level of material culture. We can see this from examining Fox's principal example, the *pa.* It is true that they are sometimes on hills and are enclosed by earthen walls, but there the similarity ceases. The Celtic hillfort was fortified against cavalry and projectile attack. The Maori had no horses and did not use projectiles.[16] All fighting was done hand to hand with wooden clubs (*patti*) or thrusting spears (*taiaha*), as is abundantly evidenced both from archaeology and from historical records. True, some of the *pa* were fortified against projectiles, but that was in response to the introduction of European guns, which set off a series of Maori land wars.[17] Fox was aware of the lack of projectiles and circumvented the problem by not mentioning it in the text until the end of the closing lecture. She also omitted to point out that no Celtic hillfort has anything comparable to the large 'chief's house' or meeting house, *whare whakairo*, which was the symbolic and physical heart of Maori society.[18]

In her concluding chapter, Fox made cross-cultural comparisons between the 'three social orders': of the chief, Maori *ariki*, with the Roman *rex*, of the '*rangatira* or warrior-chiefs', with the Roman *equites*, and the *tohunga*, priests, with the Celtic druids. Below these were the *cookee*, corresponding to the Roman *plebs*. She stopped short of equating this social order with Dumézil's 'three functions' of Indo-European society,[19] but states that: 'the similarities … are not just a coincidence; the fortifications are products of two people with *similar social values* in which success in warfare and its corollary, defence, were paramount'.[20] The emphasis is mine, intended to point out the circularity of the argument from the existence of defensive structures to the supposition that 'social values' are similar. Such 'values' are not peculiar to either Celts or Maori, but could equally well apply to any other hierarchical agricultural society (e.g. Shang China, Aztec Mexico, pre-colonial Benin, etc.).

Why should Fox persist in making comparisons which she should have known were untenable? I have been forced to the conclusion that she did not see them as untenable, because she was still thinking along evolutionary lines and, in her view, Maori and Celt were at an equivalent stage of development. This explains the otherwise bizarre reference to 'savages' noted earlier. By her analysis of the *pa,* Fox may have thought she had lifted the Maori up one evolutionary notch, from 'savagery' to

[16] Trotter & McCulloch 1997: 76–81.
[17] Prickett 1997: 110.
[18] Fox 1976: 32–36, Allen 1998, Salmond 1984, 120.
[19] Widely known since the 1950s, though perhaps not available in English.
[20] Fox 1976: 63–65.

‘barbarism’, implicitly following the well-known scheme set out by Lewis Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877).

My second example, a decorated wooden artefact, shows the reasoning in reverse but based upon the same assumption that the ancient Celts had Maori-like practices, in this case, tattooing. The artefact is a lifesize wooden head, allegedly found near Roscrea, co. Tipperary. It was on display in the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas,[21] but has now been acknowledged as a fake. In an engagingly candid paper its original purchaser, Edmund Carpenter, analyses the circumstances both of its acquisition in the 1980s and of its exposure as a forgery in the 1990s, partly because of my research on its provenance.[22]

The discussion that follows deals with its original assessment by the British scholar Dr Anne Ross, well-known for her seminal work on *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967) and for her ability imaginatively to combine folklore with archaeology and literature. Ross was commissioned by the Menil Collection to comment upon the Roscrea Head and published an essay upon it in 1987. She noted that it was made of ‘bog oak’ which radiocarbon tests dated to the fourth or fifth centuries AD (more recent tests have moved the date into the period AD 680–880[23]). She compared the decorative motifs to a variety of Celtic objects in La Tène style, from various parts of Europe and ranging in date from the fourth century BC to the sixth century AD, then discussed ‘tattooing and skin painting in Ancient Europe’. It is clear that she supposed that the carving represent tattooing, presumably because of the obvious similarity to Maori art—though this is not stated.

Drawing on a range of literary and folk traditions she concluded that the Head may be that of a pagan divinity and that the find-place may therefore be a Christianised pagan sanctuary, for ‘the godhead and the severed head both symbolised the power of faith and in Ireland, unconquered and but slightly affected by the Roman Empire, the melding of the old and new beliefs must have presented no serious problems’. Her final words were: ‘The harmonious fusion in Ireland of Druidic divinity with compelling Christianity resulted in the magnificent imagery and design that was to become the glory of Irish ecclesiastical art. Nowhere is this to be witnessed more poignantly and dramatically than in the Wondrous Head of Roscrea’.[24]

Setting aside the lyricism required by an art catalogue, it is interesting to see how Ross is thinking. She accepts without question

[21] *La rime et la raison* 1984, 321.
[22] Carpenter 1995: 41, 45.
[23] Carpenter 1995: 42
[24] Ross 1987: 56.

the romantic premise that the Irish were an unchanging people, untouched by the Romans and hardly affected by Christianity. This approach has been described as the 'nativist' position and is nowadays well-understood as a hybrid child of the Celtic Revival and the Irish nationalist agenda.[25] The anti-nativist position rejects the idea that the epic literature from which Ross draws her social constructs is of any great antiquity. Indeed Kim McCone has gone so far as to suggest that the famous 'severed head' motif is actually borrowed from the Bible rather than representing a pre-Christian Irish practice.[26]

Why does Ross feels the need to mention Christianity? Why not simply accept the Roscrea Head as an object of the La Tène period, since that is where she finds most of her analogies? The reasons are twofold. Firstly the comparisons with La Tène art are not convincing. Secondly, and more importantly, the alleged find-place happened to be the very well-known ecclesiastical site of Monaincha, to which much folklore is attached.[27] It is this folklore which gave depth and some plausibility to the Ross interpretation. But, as we have now learnt, the dealer simply invented the provenance, which appealed to his 'highly educated, logical, romantic imagination'[28] and the Head has no connection with Monaincha, or Roscrea, or anywhere else. Dr Ross and the Menil Collection were both cruelly deceived.

However, Irish scholars had always been very reluctant to accept the antiquity of the Roscrea Head, which had been offered on sale in Dublin as a Maori artefact since 1955. In 1971 the National Museum of Ireland had refused to acquire it on the grounds that it was more likely to be Maori than Irish.[29] Many people suppose that it is Maori, or a copy on Irish oak. In fact it cannot be authentic, nor a copy of an authentic original, because it does not conform to the grammar of Maori tattooing, *moko.* In *moko* each line is a sign, giving a message about lineage, status, occupation and personal history, but there are some unvarying motifs, particularly the set of curved lines which brackets the mouth.[30] This is not present on the Roscrea Head, which also differs by the treatment of the hair, which in Maori carving is usually a topknot or not shown.

If the Head is not Maori, it is still likely to have been made in Ireland, however uncertain its specific provenance. It is carved from north European oak, quantities of which were used in medieval

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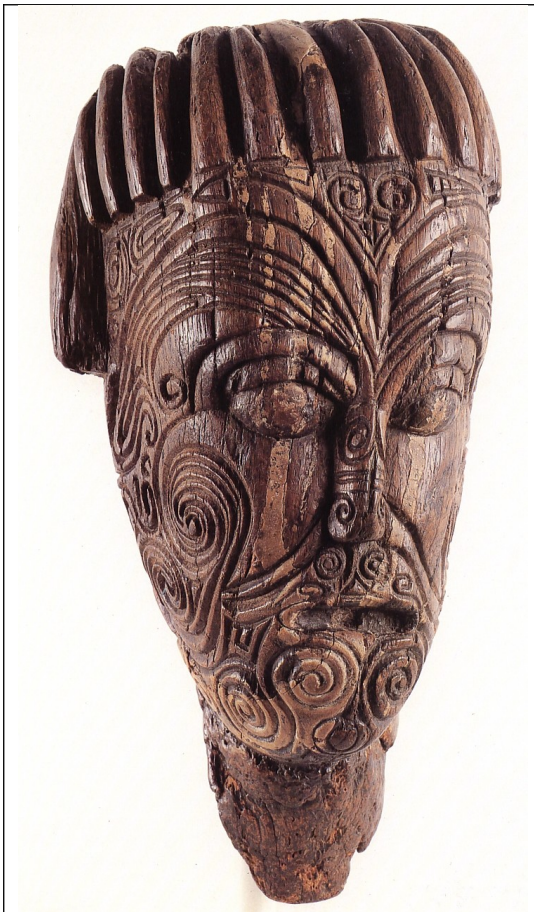
[25] Sims-Williams 1986; McCone 1991, 1–28.
[26] McCone 1991: 30.
[27] Reported by, among others, Gerald of Wales (37) nicely translated in Kelly 1848: 122–123.
[28] Carpenter 1995: 47.
[29] Michael Ryan pers.comm. 1990.
[30] Te Riria and Simmons 1989, *passim;* Robley 1896, *passim;* Mead 1984, *passim*; see also Carpenter 1995: 42–44.

trackways and artificial islands (*crannóg*), where it aged into the richly coloured 'bog oak'. But the radiocarbon date of 680–880 AD applies only to the wood, not to the carving. The dendrochronologist Michael Baillie has pointed out that 'the carving looks as if it were performed after the wood was already aged', beginning to crack in a characteristic radial pattern which the hairstyle can 'both exploit and disguise'.[31] In other words the timber had first aged, then been dug out and exposed long enough for it to crack. Masses of bog oak were obtained during nineteenth-century drainage operations and from the 1850s there was a vogue for using it for decorative objects typically using Irish or La Tène motifs.[32]

It is conceivable that the Roscrea Head was created in that antiquarian spirit: the Sydney archaeologist Catherine Palmer, studying the carving from detailed photographs, has shown what the first stage would have looked like. The stiff down-combed hairstyle is typical of Irish ecclesiastical objects of the eighth to tenth centuries AD, most notably the metal crucifixion plaque from Rinnagan, co. Roscommon, now in the National Museum of Ireland. This also has the best parallel to the spiral decoration on the cheeks of the Roscrea Head, as Ross points out.[33]

[31] Carpenter 1995: 42.
[32] Sheehy 1986: 78–86.
[33] Ross 1987: 52; she gives a sixth-century date, but an eighth-century date is more commonly accepted, see *Trésors d'Irlande* 1983: 149–151 and Johnson 1998.

	
The Roscrea Head: ‘Head of a God’, oak with traces of pigment, 15x7¾x7½ in. Reproduced from p. 51 of *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era,* New York: Harry N. Abrams.	The Roscrea Head without surface decoration, drawing by Catherine Grant Palmer, Sydney 2000.

I can imagine a Celticising design created as a scholarly witticism by someone who was acquainted with Classical references to woad-painted

Britons—a cliché of antiquarian reconstruction.[34] The designer had to be aware of Maori tattoo, for the resemblances are too striking to be just a coincidence. Most antiquarians would have been aware of *moko*, for the Maori were a popular subject of enquiry throughout the nineteenth century[35] and by the 1880s *moko* was so well embedded in Irish scholarly culture that W.F. Wakeman needed neither references nor illustrations to support a comparison with the carvings at Newgrange: 'We find that New Zealanders, and not a few other savage tribes, were in the habit of tattooing their persons with figures almost exactly similar'.[36]

Tattooing had been a fascinating topic ever since Cook's voyages, when at least one tattooing implement was collected. The use of tattoo was discussed by James Burney and very probably in his family's salon.[37] There was a minor craze for Maori heads (some of which were tattooed after death to meet the demand)[38] and for Maori carvings in general. Two of Cook's companions, the surgeon James Patten and second lieutenant James King, gave substantial collections to Trinity College, Dublin, including at least one carved wooden head.[39] This head bears a certain resemblance to the Roscrea Head and could have served as an inspiration. Other sources of inspiration could have been books such as John Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830) and the hugely popular collection of Maori portraits by George French Angas, exhibited in London in 1846 and published as *The New Zealanders Illustrated* (1847). The interest in *moko* continued to be catered for by Horatio Robley's articles in the *Illustrated London News* 1864–1868 and by his books thereafter.[40]

My 'Celticising witticism' scenario runs counter to Edmund Carpenter's view that the Head was a commercial modern fake. Why create such a fake? It apparently remained unsold for over 30 years and singularly failed to impress any scholar other than Anne Ross, who happened to be sincerely committed to a certain view of the Celtic past and was misled by the alleged provenance. It also deceived Carpenter, who recommended that the Menil purchase the Head, but he does not claim to be an expert in Celtic art. He wrote: 'We wanted that story to be

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[34] Piggott 1989: 76–85. See also C.H. Smith's body-painted 'Maæata and Caledonian' (c. 1814) in Yarwood 1989: 23–26.

[35] Hooper-Greenhill 1998.

[36] Wakeman 1881: 548.

[37] The tattooing implement is now in Göttingen, National Museum of Australia 2006: 79. Burney's comments of 1773 are in Hooper ed. 1975: 52, 67, 91.

[38] It will be recalled that Queequeg was trying to sell an embalmed 'New Zealand head—a ghastly thing enough' when Ishmael first saw him at the Spouter Inn. Melville 1992 [1851]: 19, 22.

[39] Smith 1960, 89–90; the head, a gable ornament (*koruru*), is now in the National Museum of Ireland. See also Ó Síocháin et al 2012: 27–28.

[40] Bell 1992: 10–11, 100–101; Reed 1979; Robley 1896.

true. It was such a lovely head, such a lovely story'.[41]

The word 'lovely' conjures up Oscar Wilde's unforgettable evocation in *De Profundis*[42] of 'Celtic myth and legend, where the loveliness of the world is shown through a mist of tears, and the life of a man is no more than the life of a flower'—and therein lies the problem. To continue to imagine universal 'Celts' who are heroic, for Aileen Fox, or mystical, for Anne Ross, has seduced these two scholars and their audience away from the historical reality of the people who created the *pa* or the Roscrea Head. Conflating the identities of the Maori and of the Celts or Irish has made for good reading but has not adequately served scholarship. It has served only to reinforce the colonial mentality which constructed both the Celts and the Maori as generically different from their conquerors.

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[41] 1995: 48.
[42] 1949 [1905]: 95–96.

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